# Busy saying nothing new:
# Live silence in TV reporting of 9/11

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*Abstract*

*News of the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001 spread fast, mainly through dramatic images of the events broadcast via a global television media, particularly 24-hour news channels such as BBC News 24 and CNN. Following the initial report many news channels moved to dedicated live coverage of the story. This move, to what Liebes (1998) describes as a 'disaster marathon', entails shifting from the routine, regular news agenda to one where the event and its aftermath become the main story and reference for all other news. In this paper, we draw upon recordings from the BBC News 24 channel on September 11th 2001 during the immediate aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and Pentagon to argue that the coverage of this event, and other similar types of events, may be characterised as news permeated with strategic and emergent silences. Identifying silence as both concrete and metaphorical, we suggest that there are a number of types of silence found in the coverage and that these not only act to cover for lack of new news, or give emphasis or* gravitas, *but also that the vacuum created by a lack of news creates an emotional space in which collective shock, grieving or wonder are managed through news presented as phatic communion.*

## Introduction

The attacks on New York and Washington on September 11th 2001 captured the world's attention. News of the attacks spread immediately, carried through the global television media, particularly 24-hour news channels such as BBC News 24 and CNN. After the initial event many of the channels soon dedicated their programme to providing rolling coverage and immediate reporting of events as they happened over the course of the day. Whilst an orientation to immediacy, of reporting the latest events (manifest in so-called 'breaking news' and summed up con-

cisely by BBC News 24's slogans: 'All the news as it happens' and 'Because the news never ends') has been explored within News Discourse (Van Dijk 1988; Tumber 1999; Allan 1999) and Media and Journalism Studies (Schlesinger 1978; Zelizer 1992), some of the consequences of a rolling single reference news agenda alongside the imperative for reporting the latest news have received less attention in the literature (cf. Schlesinger 1978; Liebes 1998; Jaworski *et al.* 2003).

In this paper we aim to address some of the issues raised by this type of news coverage focusing on the way the drive to fulfil the principle of immediacy and provide constant live updated coverage leads to a number of different strategies compensating for the lack of new information about the event or hard facts to report. The compensatory method found within this type of event involves what we characterise as the strategic and emergent use of 'live silence'. Silence in this respect not only refers to concrete silence (meaning absence of talk/sound) but also metaphorical silence, such as the absence of new information filled by incessant repetition of old information, irrelevant talk, noise, and so on (Jaworski 1993, 1997, 2001; Knapp 2000).

After a brief characterisation of the data and method we explain the notion of 'silence' as an underlying explanatory term to be used in the analysis of our material before moving to a detailed illustration of our argument with the data extracts. Our subsequent discussion suggests a shift in live broadcast news function from reporting facts/dissemination of information to a more interpersonal function of 'keeping in touch' with the audience.

## Data and method

The data extracts used in this paper come from the BBC News 24 TV channel recorded on 11th September 2001. Specifically, we use two hours of news broadcast between 5:00 to 7:00 p.m., and the 'America under Siege' special, chaired by the senior journalist David Dimbleby and broadcast between 8.30 and 9.30 p.m. (all UK times). The first section of data was selected as representative of the coverage since the event was first reported, whilst the 'America Under Siege' special, containing an hour of panel discussion and news updates, was trailed as a programme in which to assess the day's events, reflect upon the implications and gather informed opinion as to the perpetrators and possible reaction. The Dimbleby Special is thus an attempt (albeit, as we shall see below, not a very successful one) to provide a transition point in the news coverage where the story is moved to the next stage: from what *has* happened to what *might* happen next.

Our approach to data analysis is qualitative and relies on Discourse Analysis as a heuristic procedure to address news discourse as a reaction

to a certain set of events and as a way of helping shape our understanding of these events (cf. Schiffrin 2002). We concentrate mainly on the social semiotic analysis of news as instances of multimodal discourse (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2001) involving language (talk) (Hodge and Kress 1988), visuals (Kress and Van Leeuwen1996) and sound (Van Leeuwen 1999; Constantinou forthcoming). In a broader sense, we focus on how live news turns into a verbal account of a series of non-verbal events and images (cf. Jaworski and Galasiński 2002).

## Concrete and metaphorical silences in the TV reports of 9/11

In this section we analyse our data extracts with regard to the different forms of silence, although in the broadest terms all the specific instances of silence discussed below can be accounted for in terms of two main, partly overlapping categories:

- − absence of sound/speech
- − absence of (specific) information.

These two categories are not in any absolute contradistinction to one another. For us, silence is a fuzzy and graded concept, and it does not only occur in place of talk/sound: it also occurs when talk *does* take place, but, for example, certain topics are avoided (cf. Jaworski 1993; Cotterill this issue). It is also true that the above two categories invoke silence in typical, negative terms as an 'absence' of something else, although, for the most part, talk and silence can be said to co-exist and feed off one another.

Our use of 'silence' as a metaphor for describing the discursive phenomena found in news reporting of 9/11 stems from our conviction that reporting of such unprecedented, unexpected, unpredictable and extreme events (also found in the reporting of other live or unfolding events, e. g., the 2003 war in Iraq) leads to temporary breakdowns of the usual systems of news reporting (cf. Zelizer and Allan 2002). As Zelizer and Allan observe, the reporting of 9/11 was characterised by enabling the public to deal with the trauma of the horrific events, and by the public observing the trauma of the reporters reporting them. It was necessary, then, to create a coherent narrative which would allow the public to comprehend what was going on, it was necessary to make the extraordinary routine (Tuchman 1973). However, as we argue below, before such a collective narrative (or narratives) came to be formulated, it was preceded by hours of 'live' reporting filled with less-than-coherent accounts, speculation and rumours (cf. Zelizer and Allan 2002).

This paper draws upon an aspect of Liebes' (1998) discussion of live 'disaster marathons' where regular TV news gives way to the 24 hour

coverage of, in her example, a series of terrorist attacks in Israel. Liebes positions disaster marathons as types of media events (Dayan and Katz 1992), although Dayan and Katz' original definition of the term included only pre-planned, celebratory and mostly uplifting events such as signing of peace accords, royal weddings, olympic games, and so on. Although disasters may in fact disrupt the orderliness and primary aim of media events (e. g., the murder of Israeli athletes during the 1972 Munich Olympics), Liebes argues that not unlike the (typical) media events, they all belong to a broader genre of 'live reporting', as they both focus the attention of the media and the public on the extraordinariness of the events outside the usual, expected, mundane course of events. Liebes, agrees with Dayan and Katz that media events such as state funerals following political assassinations (e. g., Kennedy's or Rabin's) may indeed provide much needed closure to the public by redressing the initial trauma, but in view of the public, the viewing of the assassination and of the funeral ceremony on television may constitute one flowing event.

Dayan and Katz (1992) treat media events as liminal (Turner 1969, 1974), as their nature and effects work on a par with religion, leisure, shamanistic healings and transformation, and so on. Interestingly, from a linguistic point of view, all types of liminal events (ceremonies, rituals, departures from routine behaviour, confronting new and unpredictable social behaviour, traumatic events, etc.) are usually marked by scripted, formulaic talk or by silence. The latter is used, for example, to mark a particularly uplifting or pivotal moment (e. g., raising of a flag, lowering of a coffin), or to give the participants and/or spectators time to reflect on or 'absorb' the unfolding events. Silence is often the linguistic marker of liminal situations in which there is no verbal script readily available, for example, in the context of funerals, when the metapragmatic comment of the type 'There's nothing I can say at a moment like this', sanctions silence as appropriate behaviour. This view of silence being linked with liminal media events is indirectly supported by Liebes, who suggests that disaster marathons are characterised by the lack of a readily available 'script'; a high degree of repetition; a concentration on what in other times would be passed over or provide only a sound bite; a need to allocate blame to move the story on; and the transformation of horrific images into iconic representations detached from their original meaning. Although clearly the events and surrounds of the attacks on New York and Washington are different in many ways from the events analysed by Liebes (the degree and extent of world media coverage for one) many of the features identified are also present in the BBC coverage on 9/11. Through our analysis of the coverage of 9/11 we suggest that the concept of 'live silence' may prove to be a useful resource further characterising the genre of disaster marathons and possibly other types of live media events.

*Silent video footage (soundtrack) and repetition*

Due to the immediacy and global reach of the reporting of 9/11, the event is collectively remembered as a short video sequence of the WTC's North Tower on fire while a passenger plane flies into the South Tower. These scenes entered mass consciousness and instantly gained the status of the first of the 21st century iconic images 'defining' an era. In this respect, the image belongs to other known video sequences and photos, representing rare and shocking images of extreme moments. They are often artless and of poor quality − grainy, badly framed and unfocused. Many are taken by amateurs, or by surveillance cameras. Examples include the Zapruder film of Kennedy's assassination, the video of the Rodney King beating, the crash of the Concorde near Paris, the killing of Mohammed al-Durrah by Israeli soldiers, and so on (cf. Van Leeuwen and Jaworski 2002).

With regard to the WTC attacks, the event was filmed, photographed and broadcast from many angles, which means that there is no single defining image of 9/11. For some, the dominant image may be that of a plane approaching the South Tower while the North Tower is on fire; for others it may be the huge fire ball engulfing one of the towers, or huge plumes of smoke billowing from the towers while those trapped inside attempt to save themselves by leaping from the upper storeys (almost certainly to their death), or of the buildings imploding. The availability of different video shots afforded the various TV news companies the opportunity to construct comprehensive, multi-angled representations of the attacks (reminiscent of choosing the best angle for each moment of a scene in feature-film editing). It is not surprising that the effect of such editing was the widespread reaction of the public and media organisations commenting on the TV video footage of the attacks as reminiscent of a Hollywood action movie (but see below).

Another important feature of these images is repetition. On the day of the attacks, the BBC constantly replayed the sequence of the planes flying into the twin towers. The uniqueness, extremity, unexpectedness and gravity of the event made it the only newsworthy item of the day (see also below), which warranted the frequent re-playing of those images. Thus, whilst news images are often repeated within scheduled regular news bulletins, the temporally irregular repetition, and at times back-to-back repetition, of these images reflected the dislocation of the structure of regular news given over to the one breaking story. Commenting on the same phenomenon from the American perspective, Zelizer (2002) likens the effect of endless repetition of video footage to that of a still photographic image, stillness being, of course, the visual equivalent of silence (Poyatos 1981):

> As the planes hit the World Trade Centre, people ran to their television sets and stayed there for hours on end, watching endless loops of reruns of the actual attack whose ordering began to look more like still photographs than moving images. (Zelizer 2002: 50)

Furthermore, as Liebes (1998) comments on similar images in disaster marathons, repetition (in fact, she talks about the 'recycling' of images) does not and cannot significantly add to the public's factual knowledge of the event. Rather, through repetition, the images acquire a symbolic/iconic status and become self-referential. In Liebes' terms, '[a]s in music, sculpture or architecture, repetition carries a dynamic of its own, intensifying the images and the sounds while decontextualising them' (1998: 78). Consequently, such frequently repeated (and visually manipulated) images acquire the status of a safe formula and a source of further comment and discussion; since journalists can comment only on what they 'see', the footage of the event becomes its own source of information and subsequently influences the ensuing course of events (cf. Van Leeuwen and Jaworski 2002).

Our first data extract illustrates some of the points made above and is indicative of other, more general uses of silence in the reporting of 9/11. The extract is that of a voiceover commentary by a correspondent (DL) accompanying video footage of the North Tower on fire and the second plane approaching and crashing into the South Tower. The first shot shows the second plane (from a side angle) approaching the building and at the moment of impact there is a cut to another shot with a clearer view of the explosion showing the plane's or rather, 'point of exit' the resulting fireball (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1.  *Edited sequence of the second aircraft's approach and collision.*

Extract (1)

1 DL:  (4.0) it came: out of a clear blue sky on a mild fall morning in
2        Manhattan. (.) at first no one knew what had happened. could it have
3        been an accident? (.) *sure*ly. (.) *no*body would *fly* into the twin towers of

4       the World Trade Centre on *pur*pose .hhh but as soon as the cameras were
5       set up they caught the full: startling reality of what was going on. (4.0) in
6       slow motion (.) you can *see* a Boeing 767 a *pas*senger plane *crash*ing into
7       the South Tower. (1.5)

Quite significantly, the extract begins with a four second pause before DL's voiceover begins. Although such a pause may be explained by the practical necessity of allowing 'room' at the beginning of a taped report to insure against the report being presented without the first few words of its commentary, its effect is clearly rhetorical: it serves to add emphasis to what is going to be shown and said next. The pause may also act as an iconic representation of a 'calm before the storm', or of the unexpectedness of the attack. This is emphasised in line 1 by DL following the pause with the comment 'it came: out of a clear blue sky'. A four second pause is again observed in line 5, which may be another iconic representation of a state of extreme shock, to which a typical reaction is that of silence ('I'm speechless'). This pause acquires another function, however: that of a caesura between the report of 'what was going on' (line 5) and a repetition of the image of the plane crashing into the South Tower in slow motion, which lasts for the entirety of the commentary between lines 5−7, including a brief pause of 1.5 seconds, which ends the sequence. This caesura allows the viewer time to reflect on and analyse the images, a point further emphasised by them being presented in slow motion. In this way, the absence of verbal commentary allows the images to 'speak for themselves'.

As said above, this particular video sequence (or another version of it) is repeated a number of times in the hours of news analysed here. There is, however, a more immediate element of repetition where the sequence is replayed in slow motion with the justification that 'in slow motion (.) you can *see* a Boeing 767 a *pas*senger plane *crash*ing into the South Tower (1.5)' (lines 5−7). Impressionistically, we contend that the image is clear enough without the video footage being slowed down; rather we suggest that the slowing down of the footage is a pretext to repeat the image in the attempt to invoke its symbolism and instant iconicity. It could also be noted that showing different footage of the 'same' events (i. e., at normal speed, in slow motion, with or without a sound track, etc.) makes repetition of the same images more acceptable, and might be used by producers to fill time or to construct more lavish video sequences.

Another feature of the extract, which is not evident from the transcript, is the relative silence of the video footage. Apart from DL's voiceover, the only sound heard throughout on the soundtrack of the video clip is that of a moderate whirring of the helicopter from which some of

the footage was shot. That this sound is manipulated or overlaid is evidenced by the fact that the same sound of the helicopter's engine noise (at the same speed) is heard when the footage is shown in slow motion.

Sound is often used in this way in broadcast TV news for continuity and, by extension, cohesion purposes: the initial shot of a montage is shown with (what appears to be) its actual sound, and this sound will continue while various other images are introduced. This is the case in the above extract, with the sound track acting as a cohesive device, binding various, disparate images together and imbuing them with a common meaning (cf. Constantinou, forthcoming).

Other than the sound of a helicopter, there is no audible sound of the plane or its crashing into the South Tower. Reasons might include the microphones being too far away from the scene of the crash to pick up any sound, or the helicopter's noise level being too high − even though the noise of the collision must have been tremendous. Instead, the producers chose to overlay the footage with the noise from the helicopter, which means that in our global consciousness, the attack on WTC is a *silent* event, because that is how we remember its representation on television.

Sound (or its absence) also emphasises difference in that the news footage of the attacks is *not* like Hollywood action movies. The sound of the helicopter heard in the background of the report in Extract (1) is incongruous with the focal point of the video footage. It places the viewer as a 'distanced observer', in contrast to Hollywood action movies whose soundtracks match the events depicted on film and thus position the viewer much closer to the action, and therefore as a 'participant'.

## Unfilled pauses

In the analysis above we highlighted the appearance of unfilled pauses in the correspondent's report. This is not by any means an isolated case. In the next extract, taken from the 'America Under Siege' special, the host David Dimbleby interrupts his live discussion with the assembled panellists in the studio and introduces new film footage from the scene. With this he offers an improvised, 'live' commentary, which is also marked by frequent unfilled pauses.

### Extract (2)

1 DD: it's four o clock in New York and we go back there to see the latest
2      scenes of uh how this uh southern half of the city. uh (.) still completely
3      shrouded in smoke you'll have seen those pictures we showed earlier on
4      of the (.) wh- whole place e*rup*ting (.) with smoke and dust well there is

5       (.) the World Trade Centre as it is, (.) this afternoon in New York (.)
6       abandoned (10.0) it's like the scenes from (.) bombing in the Second
7       World War (.) even uh (2.0) perhaps of Hiroshima (1.0) though not on
8       that scale but it's: (.) it is uh (.) the most (.) devastating <I said at the
9       beginning this is> 21st century war what we *don't* yet know is who's (.)
10      behind it all.

In Extract (2), the pauses do not seem to be used for emphasis but rather indicate hesitation and uncertainty. The most significant pause in line 6 leaves the viewers with the imagery of chaos and rubble in New York for ten seconds. Other instances of hesitation, which heighten the sense of shock and disorientation on the part of the presenter, are evident in his false starts, repetitions and abrupt topic shifts scattered throughout the extract. As has been mentioned, there is a lack of a readymade 'script' in reporting disasters (Liebes 1998) and traumatic events like 9/11 (Zelizer and Allan 2002), and such truncation of DD's (and other journalists') commentary, being indicative of extemporisation, seems to add empirical weight to this observation.

*Filled pauses/Mood reporting*

The task of news organisations to provide information and verbal commentary on unfolding events is the reason why unfilled pauses and long silences are not easily tolerated in TV and radio news broadcasts. Therefore, in the absence of new 'hard' factual information coming in from the scene of the attacks, producers and journalists find other ways of filling airtime. Somewhat contrary to the expectations of what reporting news may actually be about (e. g., collecting and reporting 'hard facts', Fowler 1991; Schlesinger 1978), much of the news reporting on September 11th is devoted to what we refer to as 'mood reporting', which we also take to be instances of 'filled pauses'; verbalisations to avoid silence. Consider the following:

Extract (3)

1 JH:   and uh let's get a quick update now (.) from Washington D.C. itself *live*
2       to our correspondent Rob Watson. ((to RW)) Rob just just give a feeling
3       a sensation of the of the mood of what people are saying the atmosphere
4       where you are. (1.0)
5 RW: one word. numb.

Extract (4)

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1  JS:  I- I've been told that all off duty police officers have been asked to report
2        for for uh duty for uh rotating twelve hour shifts now. uh and uh o- other
3        than that the civilians that I've seen and spoken to (.) just a- a real and
4        palpable sense of shock that (.) uh you know a- an apparent terrorist
5        attack could've taken place (.) at what is obviously the the most symbolic
6        (.) building of American: military power.
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Although what we term 'mood reporting' is a tool regularly used in broadcast journalism to garner a 'sense' of the emotions felt in relation to an event, there seem to be identifiable instances when mood reporting is used to fill in air time due to lack of new news and in anticipation of further development (Jaworski *et al.* 2002). Silberstein (2002: 80) goes even further and suggests that the shift to the reporting of 'feeling and emotions' of 9/11 is indicative of a genre shift with media reports focusing on 'the entertainment aspects of the experience', while Chouliaraki (2004a), drawing on the work of Boltanski (1999), argues that the discourse of TV 9/11 reporting (based on the footage from the Danish national television channel) was organised around the 'politics of pity', engaging the viewers with the reported events alongside the affective and moral dimensions. In Extract (3), although framed as an 'update', the content of the anchor's question invites comments on the mood. The anchor (JH) phrases her question for the correspondent (RW) in as elaborate a fashion as possible, probably trying to fill in time, and laced with emotional references to the 'sensation', 'mood' and 'atmosphere'. RW's response, of which Extract (3) contains only the beginning, starts with a one-word description relating to the presumed psychological state of the 'people': 'numb'. He goes on to elaborate on this point (untranscribed here), reporting on the emotion of the place rather than offering any new facts or 'news'.

Likewise, in Extract (4), the reporter chooses to describe the atmosphere in Washington D.C. as 'a- a real and palpable sense of shock' (line 3). All of these questions and reports can only confirm what the viewers may suspect of the mood in the American cities hit by the attacks, and which they no doubt share to a great extent. Such news reporting, which states the obvious and also confirms the viewers' greatest fears and shares in their own horror, may be seen as the BBC's 'reaching out' to the people: those who are reported *on* and those who are reported *to* (a point we return to later).

*Interruptions/Topic switching*

In Extract (2) we highlighted the presence of a number of unfilled pauses and hesitations, which included self-interruption by the presenter of a

live studio discussion in order to go to the latest images. Interruption as a form of silence, again reflecting the lack of a journalistic script, is a recurrent feature evident in our data. For example, in the following extract (5), the correspondent who was in the WTC area at the time of the attacks gives an account of the events. Not unlike in the other cases cited so far, this is characterised by the presence of numerous filled and unfilled pauses, hesitations, topic shifts and mood reporting. During this report one of the towers in the background starts to collapse. The relative proximity and the magnitude of the imploding building startles the reporter who interrupts his commentary and disappears from the screen (see Figure 2). From this point there is no more commentary or report; rather for the remaining part of the broadcast the camera focuses on the collapsing building, random street noise serving as the soundtrack.

Extract (5)

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 1 SE:  there was another bi::g bi:g explosion, (.) <in the other tower> fla:mes
 2        coming out and this billowing grey smoke. (.) people still not
 3        panicking, (.) people not quite understanding what was going on, then
 4        somebody said that they saw an airliner (.) go into one of those towers.(.)
 5        then uh <I don't know> an hour later than that we had that big explosion
 6        from much much lower I don't know what on earth caused that, .hhh the
 7        thing that strikes me is one (.) the terribleness (.) of the incident
 8        <whatever the cause> we don't go into the politics .hhh but whatever the
 9        uh (.) whatever the cause the terribleness, the- the hu:geness (.) of what's
10        happened, huge in fact that most of the people around (.) s:imply can't
11        understand what happened. (.) people were just standing around. (.)
12        talking to each other, nodding their heads (10.0) ((one of the towers
13        begins to collapse behind SE; much screaming and panic on audio track;
14        SE, frightened, looks over his shoulder, camera loses stability and the
15        picture becomes unstable until it manages to focus on the collapsing
16        building))
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Under 'normal' circumstances, the reporter's break in his commentary would have been ignored and a new take of his account recorded. However, the uniqueness and scale of the destruction of the building captured live is of course so newsworthy that it is shown in its entirety, complete with the moment of the reporter being silenced. What may also be noted here is that this segment is repeated during the 'America Under Siege' special later on in the evening when it may be suggested that the news had moved on beyond this stage of events. Even during this showing the actual 'report' by SE is played in its entirety, including a long piece to camera before the building collapses. Rather than being edited to the

Figure 2. *Sequence of a correspontent's report interrupted due to the collapse of a WTC tower.*

point where the building begins collapsing, the 'old' verbal report provides the lead up to the continuing visually newsworthy aspect of the sequence. Thus, we suggest that the newsworthiness of this report ceases to be the description given by SE but the very fact of him being silenced by the dramatic collapse of the building. Here, topic shift also involves a shift in the centrality of one modality (speech) to another (moving image).

In the next extract, the topic shift is more deliberate when the anchor (GE) interrupts a mood report from a correspondent (RW) and announces a new development in the day's events − the beginning of an anticipated statement by the British Prime Minister:

Extract (6)

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 1 RW: succeeded (.) all around there is chaos (.) the streets are jammed with
 2       people .hhh government workers who have been turfed out of their
 3       buildings (.) there are still emergency vehicles making their way across
 4       the river .hhh to the Pentagon there (.) the White House has been =
                                    [
 5 GE:                             >Rob I'm going to have to cut you off =
 6 RW: = evacuated (.)
 7 GE: = I'm sorry Rob but the Prime Minister has just str- strode into Downing
 8       Street he's going to make a statement.< let's hear (.) the Prime Minister.
                                    [
 9 TB:                             the full horror (.) of
10       what has happened in the United States earlier today .hhh is now
11       becoming clearer ((TB's statement continues))
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Interruptions like the one in the extract above appear quite frequently throughout the day and are indicative of the uncertainty and unpredictability of the unfolding events in the immediate aftermath of the attacks. In such situations, it becomes apparent that the relative ease with which interruptions like this are acceptable is due to the interruption being central to the very idea of *breaking* news, and the main reason for the mood talk to occur is to *avoid* the silence when there is no *new* news coming in.

### Absence of factual information

In Extracts (7) and (8) below, the speakers go to considerable length and effort to state the facts they *don't know*:

Extract (7)

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1 GE: on the wire services U.S. officials are now telling the uh: wire services
2       they have some indications (.) that people associated with Osama Bin
3       Laden the (.) Saudi (.) born (.) fugitive from uh the Americans who is
4       now believed to be living in >Afghanistan some people associated with
5       Bin Laden< .hhh are linked to this attack. it's obviously very sketchy at
6       the moment but we thought we'd bring that to you with the obvious
7       caveats these are (.) .hhh unnamed officials who are briefing the news
8       services in the United States but uh (.) if we have more than that
9       obviously we'll bring it to you soon.
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Here the anchor deals with the issue of assigning the responsibility for the attacks to Osama bin Laden. Notice, however, that his reporting of the alleged responsibility is marked by a number of hesitation phenomena: a false start in line 1, hedging '*some* indication' (line 2), 'it's obviously very sketchy' (line 5), 'with the obvious caveats' (lines 6–7), repetition of 'people associated with Osama Bin Laden' (lines 2–3), 'people associated with Bin Laden' (lines 4–5), admission of limited knowledge of the relevant facts 'if we have more than that' (line 8), and a number of filled and unfilled pauses (lines 1, 3, 7, 8). This style of reporting, relatively low in deontic modality, is more reminiscent of speculation and rumour-spreading than authoritative 'breaking news'.

Likewise, the entire extract from the interview with a correspondent in New York (Extract (8)) centres on the 'flow of information' (line 8), and what is *not* known (though expected or desired to be known).

Extract 8

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 1 POC: hhh underneath the rubble is the answer to the question, .hhh how many
 2         people have lost their lives? .hhh we know there are displaced people
 3         .hhh we know there are disgusted people, a:ll across this country <and
 4         here..there are people trying to get home>. .hhh but as I speak to you
 5         David, .hhh we don't know the answer to the question .hhh of the scale
 6         of the human tragedy, (.) the analysis (.) important as it is (.) uh will be
 7         had, .hhh >but the< figures (.) on people (.) we just don't know. (.)
 8 DD:    uh a- and um uh what sort of flow of information is there. you say that
 9         nothing is really known but is everybody .hhh uh are- i- is information
10         still coming out (.) from uh the World Trade Centre down there. (.)
11 POC: we have an unconfirmed report of a building collapsing <at times like
12         this you want to hear directly from the city authorities.> I passed .hhh uh
13         one of the major hospitals (.) four hours ago .hhh they were shouting for
14         blood donations in the street (.) and about half an hour later .hhh many of
15         us were reporting that they were looking for blood across the city, (.) so.
16         (.) i- it's a very much of an immediate return .hhh to the most basic
17         way of communicating in a city of this scale, .hhh people are confused as
18         much as they are disgusted hhh people are dead and (.) people don't
19         know about it. (.) so. there is a stoicism (.) here (.) would say (.) uh we
20         would be clinging to the word panic and forgetting that people are
21         getting on with it, clearing it up and (.) angry but equally .hhh we are
22         focussing in th- attention now on what's under (.) that rubble and here
23         the situation on Times Square I don't know if we can bring you David
24         .hhh the picture behind me .hhh this was full earlier (.) ((camera shows
25         the view of an empty Times Square)) uh: of people (.) it's now deserted
26         .hhh this makes me think people are heading home, .hhh I'm concluding
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27      this because (.) one avenue is shut behind me Seventh Avenue .hhh but
28      this was full of around (.) f:ive hundred people, three hours ago,
29      where've they gone? (.) *we* think they've gone home, (.) and *we* don't
30      know the answer to that either. (.)

In this interview extract, POC states four times that 'we don't know'
something (lines 5, 7, 18−19, 29−30). Whilst news reports regularly con-
tain unknowns, in this report the unknowns take up the majority of the
broadcast and little if any new information is given. Moreover, reporting
the factual vacuum is paralleled with reporting on the absence of people
in the usually and expectedly crowded places: Times Square and Seventh
Avenue (cf. lines 23−27). In this way the characteristic of the report is
the silence of the newsroom and the silence of the city. The silence of the
city (lines 23−27), the empty streets of New York, become indicative of
a silent response to a shocking event or trauma.

### Cancellation of other events/news

As has been indicated above, one of the characteristics of this type of
event reporting is the shift from routine, regular news to news anchored
in a single event. Accordingly, on September 11th, the attacks on New
York and Washington D.C. provide the only 'story' on BBC News 24.
If other news is mentioned it is only in the negative, as *cancelled* events.

Extract (9)

1 HC:  the world's attention remains trans*fixed* on America. .hhh in Britain
2       domestic events were put on hold .hhh the Conservative l*ead*ership
3       contest has been postponed .hhh and Tony Blair cancelled his planned
4       speech at the Trades Union conference (.) .hhh he called on the world's
5       democracies to fight fanaticism.

We can assume that the media had well-planned slots for reporting the
events mentioned in Extract (9) (the Conservative Party leadership
contest and the Prime Minister's speech at the Trades Union conference),
prepared scripts from press releases and so on, but these had to be aban-
doned, or silenced. Whilst these two items are at least mentioned briefly
given reference to their non-occurrence, other domestic and world events
(cancelled or otherwise) are given no such reference. There is then a
media eclipse where no other event warrants attention and indeed other
news can be lost. In fact, a political scandal swept Britain when an advi-
sor to a government minister sent an email 'memo' on the day of the
attacks suggesting that it would be a good day to release some awkward

government statistics as the media and world attention would be else-where. The phrase used in the memo was that 'it would be a good day to bury bad news'.

## Visual silence: Empty spaces

We now return to the visual medium to discuss some instances of what we refer to as 'visual silence'. During the course of the day's reporting, numerous official statements and press conferences were broadcast from or reported on. The impromptu nature of these events which were often hastily arranged and equally often delayed, and the anticipation that something significant was going to be said meant that the media often announced and reported from the place where the conference was 'due' to happen. In the run-up to Tony Blair's statement (cf. Extracts (10) and (11)), the producers of the programme show live pictures from 10 Downing Street, where preparations for the PM's statement are being made. The pictures show an 'empty' room, two workmen bringing in a lectern, and an anonymous hand gesturing 'thumbs up' right in front of the camera (see Figure 3). At the same time, the anchors audibly hesitate, elongate their vowels and slow down the tempo of their speech stretching out the otherwise 'dead' moment of anticipation for the PM to turn up. In Extract (11) (line 5), the anchor GE asks a rhetorical question from the viewers' point of view, probably directed at the producers, on the availability of live pictures from 10 Downing Street. Eventually, each extract ends with another reporter being asked to fill in the rest of the pause in anticipation of the press conference. In Extract (11) (line 12), a correspondent (RW) is asked for some 'mood reporting' only to be interrupted later on when the PM finally does appear (cf. Extract (6), lines 5−7).

Extract (10)

```
1 JH: .hhh he returned s:wiftly from: uh- Brighton (.) u:h to u:h to sit in to chair a
2      special .hhh emergency (.) cabinet .hhh ((cut to an empty room in Downing
3      Street where preparations are being made)) meeting at 10 Downing Street
4      <and indeed this is the side>.hhh the sight now in*si:de* .hhh 10 Downing Street
5      because we *are* expecting the Prime Minister .hhh >to: talk to:< journalists
6      very *short*ly clearly still: setting up there .hhh inside Downing Street .hhh u:h
7      we are ex*pect*ing him to talk uh in about 5 minutes >*or so*< .hhh uh but uh
8      while we wait *fo:r* the Prime Minister to a- appear .hhh let's uh get the latest
9      uh from the world of politics .hhh p-political reaction *to:* this .hhh our chief
10     political correspondent Nick Robinson is outside 10 Downing Street [...]
```

Figure 3. *Sequence of 'backstage' activities in preparation for a 'main'/'frontstage' event.*

Extract (11)

1 GE: some breaking news just within the past few minutes from *NA*TO headquarters
2     in *Brus*sels *NA*TO ambassadors have been called to an e*mer*gency meeting at
3     nine o'clock tomorrow *morn*ing .hhh according to the NATO Secretary General
4     (.) George Robertson <we can check in also> o:n Downing Street as we await
5     the Prime Minister (.) uh to appear can we? (.) ((cut to shot of Downing Street
6     interior – an empty room)) ye:s there we are those are pictures of the .hhh
7     inside of Downing Street where the Prime Minister will be making a statement
8     we ex*pect* within just a few moments we'll obviously .hhh go over to that live
9     ((a 'thumbs up' gesture in the foreground of the shot then cut back to studio))
10    .hhh as it happens (.) but uh- first let's go over to Washington a:nd (.) Rob
11    Watson who is in the *cen*tre of the city very close to the White House .hhh and
12    just again describe the *scene* for us if you would Rob that's the- *Pent*agon
13    presumably we can see burning behind you. (1.0)

To us, the images described above constitute instances of visual silence as they foreground what under 'normal' circumstances is not meant to be seen by the public: backstage preparations for the PM's delivery of a statement and an empty room. In other words, the room, which during the delivery of the statement serves as background, here becomes the figure (cf. Kwiatkowska 1997).

**News as phatic communion**

As in Liebes' analysis of disaster reporting referred to above, the TV reporting of 9/11 attests to a degree of chaos and uncertainty in providing a verbal (and, on occasion, visual) account of the attacks and their aftermath. 'The directors of television were pushed into open-ended live coverage of a disaster without the benefit of a "script". The fact is they had no previous experience of such coverage, and no handy genre or rules' (Liebes 1998: 71−72). The inevitable result of the absence of a 'script' for an event and its aftermath is, we suggest, 'silence'. In the case of the TV reporting on 11th September, this is evidenced by the protracted efforts of news reporters to *avoid* silence, when all other news items planned for the day disappear from the agenda. Thus, our data manifests a seemingly wide range of markers, which are not typically expected in news broadcasts: filled and unfilled pauses, hesitations, false starts and repetition, expression of uncertainty about the reported facts, hedging, irrelevant talk, mood reporting, interruption, and so on.

The strenuous attempts at breaking and avoiding silence as much as possible include the reporters' pervasive discussion of the present, the here and now: the devastated streets in Manhattan, the mood of the people, absence of people in the streets of New York, ongoing preparations for reportable 'main' events, and so on. All of these discursive features of the broadcasts are reminiscent of what can be referred to as 'phatic communion', or 'small talk'.

Phatic communion (Malinowski 1923) is a mode of talk that aims to establish and maintain good interpersonal relations, mark willingness to communicate in general, and keep channels of communication open (cf. Coupland 2000, 2003). Traditionally, phatic communion, or small talk, is believed to occupy *marginal* stages of conversation. For example, Laver (1974: 220; 1981: 301) defines phatic communion as largely confined to the opening and closing phases of conversation with the aim to 'defuse the potential hostility of silence in situations where speech is conventionally anticipated'. Later theorising of phatic communion (e. g., Coupland *et al.* 1992) adopts a more functional approach focusing on interactional goals of talk:

> … by this account, phatic communion would cease to be associated *uniquely* with fringes of encounters (Laver) or extended chatting … and we should expect to find instances where a relationally designed and perhaps phatic mode of talk surfaces whenever relational goals become salient − even *within* sequences of transactional, instrumental, or task-oriented talk. (Coupland *et al.* 1992: 213)

This approach allows us to identify stretches of phatic talk by orienting to interactants' local concerns, patterns of self-presentation and alignments whenever relational goals are foregrounded, which is consistent with the data presented in this paper. Despite the commonplace understanding of news broadcasts as oriented primarily towards the presentation of facts, most of our examples seem to offer instead reassurances to the viewers that they are not alone in their shock and grief and that it is acceptable to be confused and traumatised. This is achieved by the reports concentrating on the typical features of small talk: discussing the present time and the immediate environment of the participants (here, the shared 'environment' is provided by the mediation of TV images to the global community of viewers), discussing *shared* emotions and avoiding inevitable silence (Malinowski, 1923; see also Jaworski 2000).

This reading of the instances of talk in our data extracts points, we would then argue, to a certain shift in the function of broadcast news: from referential to interpersonal. Paradoxically, 24-hour news channels aiming at 'breaking news' seem to find it difficult to fulfil this mission as there are not enough newsworthy news items to be broken *all the time*, especially when there is only one story deemed to be newsworthy to be reported. What else can be done while waiting for new news but to do small talk?

But small talk in the news need not only be seen as a by-product of the dearth of new information. Dayan and Katz (1992: 5) argue that media events (and we contend that 9/11 *was* a media event) 'are *organized outside the media*, and the media serve them in what Jakobson (1960) would call a phatic role in that, at least theoretically, the media only provide a channel for their transmission' [original emphasis]. Again, we find links between our reading of our data, and Liebes' comments on marathon disaster reporting on TV:

> [W]hen disaster strikes it brings the anxiety of being left out on a limb, with nothing sure to hold onto. People turn to television when they have lost their sense of personal safety for themselves and for their families, and when they feel that it is still an unresolved condition, that is, that terror may strike again. Thus, when people are on time-out, mostly viewing television, with no routine to support them and having lost confidence in the government's capacity to support them, television's anchor becomes the only anchor, and television takes on responsibility under unique circumstances. (Liebes 1988: 81)

Mellencamp (1990) also places emphasis upon the therapeutic aspects of the live coverage of traumatic events like 9/11. For example, it is suggested that

[i]n catastrophic times, information plays 'a therapeutic service akin to prayer or chanting. Cloaked as an episteme, a desire to know, it soothes our anxiety, becomes a story, therapy, and collective ritual.' Later, she adds, 'it will be known as myth.' (Mellencamp 1990, quoted in Sreberny 2002: 220−221)

Finally, Schudson (2002), borrowing terminology from Hallin (1996), argues that in the reporting of 9/11 a shift occurred from the 'sphere of legitimate controversy', which commits journalists to objectivity and balancing of opposed views, to the 'sphere of consensus', which allows journalists to re-align with their audiences presupposing shared assumptions, views and values. The tenor of talk changes from detached neutrality to a solemn, pastoral, caring one. 'Much reporting after September 11 turned toward a prose of solidarity rather than a prose of information' (Schudson, 2002: 41).

**Conclusion: Silence in the news**

In this paper we have argued that the media coverage of 9/11, and similar types of events, may be characterised as news permeated with strategic and emergent 'live silences'. Our discussion and characterisation of live silences does not, however, suggest that TV news broadcasts are in any way less meaningful than those that they rely on, or have available pre-formulated scripts or more 'factual' news. On the contrary, we believe that the occurring silences, together with the journalists' attempts to break and replace them with specific forms of talk, referred to in our discussion as phatic communion, are highly meaningful.

The choice of the TV producers to create a 'silent' image of the plane crashing into the South Tower (Extract (1)) serves to create an aura of poignancy, not realism. Long pauses allowing the viewers to contemplate the scenes of the disaster (Extract (2)) signal journalists' own sense of awe and trauma. Filled pauses, and the avoidance of silence in the face of no new factual information coming in, results in 'mood reporting' (Extracts (3) and (4)) and orients the TV broadcast towards interpersonal, phatic communion with the viewers. Interruption and abrupt topic switches are indicative of the unexpected nature of the unfolding events (Extract (5)) and a search for the most relevant angle of reporting and source of information (Extract (6)). On-the-record, low modality of the reporting, speculation and hedging present the news as understated rather than sensationalised (Extracts (7) and (8)). Formulating other news planned for the day in the negative (as not taking place; Extract (9)) emphasises the newsworthiness of the main story. Finally, betraying the visual silence of irrelevant 'backstage' scenes (Extracts (10) and (11))

signifies the liveness of the broadcast and the anticipation of news to come instead of pre-formulating it.

On the one hand, as we have argued, this phatic approach to the dissemination of news has a positive effect of the audience coming to terms with the shock and witness bearing (Zelizer 2002). On the other hand, extreme focus on the immediate environment of the event, self-generating and self-referential news reporting decontextualises, iconicises and totemises the event cutting it off from its wider socio-political-historical context, suppressing non-establishment voices, and seeking immediate resolution which may simply escalate the disaster rather than alleviate it. In fact, as Montgomery (2004) demonstrates, in the first days after the attacks, the discourse of US politicians and journalists followed the path of mass hysteria taking the description of *the act* from less to more retaliatory: 'this cowardly act' → 'a well-co-ordinated, extensive assault' → 'an act of war' → 'war' (see also Graham *et al.* 2004). Again, here, we echo Liebes' (1998) commentary on the style of the Israeli TV reporting of Hamas suicide bombers' attacks on Israeli buses. In her view, television's disaster routine has dangerous consequences for the democratic process by demanding instant, rather than weighted, solutions (often resulting in more blood being spilt); blurring the past (e. g., obliterating previous efforts to restore peace); transmitting a message of failure (e. g., losing optimism, providing terrorists with a stage). Overall, it seems that whether reporting domestic/local or global events of great symbolic significance, the role of the news media is shifting from disclosing new information to offering specific affective and moral readings of the events (cf. Chouliaraki 2004 a, b), and providing the spectators with a sense of being in touch either with their neighbours or the rest of the imagined world community.

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## Transcription conventions

Transcription notation is adapted from Gail Jefferson as detailed in Atkinson and Heritage (1984).

| [ | Simultaneously starting talk. |
|---|---|
| [    ] | Overlapping talk. |

| | |
|---|---|
| (.) | Short pause (less than one second). |
| (2.0) | Longer pause (in seconds, and tenths of a second). |
| < > | Indicates a shift in the speed of delivery; < > indicates faster tempo, > < slower tempo. |
| = | Contiguous utterances; also one speaker's turn as continuing across lines of the transcript. |
| Um, mm, er, oh | Filled pauses, hesitations or exclamations. |
| ? | Rising intonation at the end of a speaker's turn. |
| , | Indicates an intonation (flat or rising) which suggests the incompleteness of a turn. |
| . | Indicates a falling intonation at the end of a turn. |
| *word* | Indicates stress on a word or its syllables. |
| wo::rd | Colons indicate the prolongation of the immediately prior sound. The number of colons indicates relative length. |
| hhh | Audible expulsion of breath (laughter, sighing etc.) |
| .hhh | Sharp intake of breath. Number of tokens denotes sound length. |
| ( ) | Indicates uncertainty of an utterance for transcription. |
| (( )) | Contextual, paralinguistic, non-verbal and prosodic information. |

**Personnel identifications**

| | |
|---|---|
| DD: | David Dimbleby (presenter) |
| DL: | David Loin (news reporter) |
| GE: | Gavin Esler (anchor) |
| HC: | unidentified (news reader) |
| JH: | Jane Hill (anchor) |
| JS: | John Subworth (correspondent) |
| POC: | Paddy O'Connell (correspondent) |
| RW: | Rob Watson (correspondent) |
| SE: | Steven Evans (correspondent) |
| TB: | Tony Blair (British Prime Minister) |

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